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SPANISH-AMERICAN POETS OF TODAY AND YESTERDAY

II. JOSÉ SANTOS CHOCANO, *el Poeta de América*

In the contemporary literature of Spanish America, as well as in that of the United States, the tendency toward Americanization is quite apparent. There are literary critics who claim that the "American Spirit" has already differentiated for more than a century the literatures produced on this side of the Atlantic from those of the mother countries; other critics, equally authoritative, believe that the various American literatures have been so dominated by European traditions that if they are to be treated separately from those of England, Spain, and Portugal, it is because of convenience rather than because of any essential differences. Whether we accept either extreme opinion or whether we take the middle ground, it will be readily admitted that during the greater part of the nineteenth century the political independence of the American Republics was not accompanied by a corresponding independence in literature. The intense desire, then, that we find in the "New Poets" of this country and in "Los Nuevos" of Spanish America to produce literature that is manifestly American serves as a bond of union among the most vigorous contemporary poets of the New World.

One result of the new movement in literature in this country has been to bring into prominence the most notable exception to the literary dependence of our men of letters upon English traditions; Walt Whitman, generally considered in other countries as the most complete representative in literature of the United States in its period of most rapid development, is rapidly gaining similar recognition among his own countrymen. "He epitomized his people so perfectly that he could make no impression upon them" is the explanation given by a recent biographer for his failure to gain the attention of the democratic masses for whom he wrote (Basil de Sélincourt, *Walt Whitman*, page 241). For the reason, then, that he did epitomize so completely his own people, for the reason that he saw so clearly and intensely the realities of life about him and gave expression to his observations and individual experiences in vigorous, rhythmic lines, unfettered by traditional rules, he is the

recognized master of the "New Poets." He was the inspired bard of Americanism, the self-conscious and self-avowed maker of "autochthonous song."

The poet who stands in similar relationship to "Los Nuevos" of Spanish America, the poet often referred to as "El Poeta de América," is José Santos Chocano of Perú, who became the acknowledged leader of the new movement with the publication of *Alma América* in 1906. Because of this similarity of relationship, because he has so often been called the Walt Whitman of South America and because he has himself challenged comparison with the great democratic bard of the North in the line "Walt Whitman tiene el norte; pero yo tengo el sur," there is evidently a sufficient basis of resemblance to justify a comparison of the two poets, in spite of certain essential differences.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The literary career of José S. Chocano may be divided for the sake of convenience into three periods. The first period, from about 1893 to 1900, is represented by several collections of short poems and three poems of considerable length. The first collection, *Iras Santas*, published in 1895 in red ink, was composed mainly of poems expressing the hot indignation of a young man not yet twenty years old at the sight of social injustice, and the intense hatred that he felt for the tyrannical dictator who had rewarded his precocious political adventures with imprisonment. In the same year appeared *En la Aldea*, a collection of poems very different from those of *Iras Santas*. Printed in blue ink, indicative of youthful love and joy of living in a rural environment, they expressed a peace and serenity of mind, a lyrical tenderness, rarely found elsewhere in his poetry. *Azahares*, 1896, was followed by three long poems, *La Epopeya del Morro*, *El Canto del Siglo*, and *El Derrumbe*. The best of these is *La Epopeya del Morro*, inspired by the glorious defence of El Morro and the heroic death of Bolognesi in the war with Chile. These poems of his first period fill a volume of about five hundred pages, *Poesías Completas*. In this volume (3d ed. Barcelona, 1910) is to be found a short, illuminating prologue by the recently deceased Peruvian critic and essayist, Manuel González Prada, who ends his study of the poet in the first stage of his development with the authoritative statement: "Chocano merece llamarse el Poeta Nacional del Perú."

The second period is marked by the publication in 1906 of *Alma América*, the volume of poems that carried the name of the poet far beyond the boundaries of his own country and changed his title from "El Poeta Nacional del Perú" to "El Poeta de América." To the same period belong three publications of less importance: *Los Conquistadores*, 1906, a vigorous dramatization of an incident in the conquest of Perú; *i Fiat Lux!*, 1908, containing several poems of his first period, revised and condensed, and a considerable number of new ones; *El Dorado, epopeya salvaje*, Santiago de Cuba, 1908.

The third period is one of much promise but little fulfillment. From time to time a poem from his pen has appeared in periodicals in various parts of the world, but the volumes, *Romancero de Indias*, *Arte Vida*, long announced and eagerly awaited by the enthusiastic admirers that *Alma América* gained for him everywhere, are apparently still in preparation.

THE AMERICANISM OF WHITMAN AND CHOCANO

"I have wished to put the complete Union of the States in my songs without any preference or partiality whatever," wrote Whitman, near the end of his life, in *A Backward Glance*, and that he succeeded in doing so is generally admitted. Intensely interested in the surging life of the democratic masses, mingling joyously with all classes of people, fully capable of understanding their motives and actions because of his all-embracing fraternal spirit, viewing in his leisurely way the cosmopolitan and bustling life of the Eastern cities or wandering in vagabond fashion through the rapidly developing states of the Mississippi Valley and of the West, he was enabled to put into his poems the strenuous, multifarious, democratic life of his country. The inspired singer of great achievement, of strong personalities and heroic action, he found abundant material for his epic inspiration in the ideal democracy that he saw in the process of realization. His heroes were not the dominant leaders that epic poets were wont to glorify; they were the laborers, artisans, farmers, woodsmen, "powerful, uneducated persons," capable of wonderful achievement when working "en masse." The majority of his poems may be looked upon as the fragmentary parts of the great epic poem of democracy, of which the "divine, average man" is the hero and of which he is the self-avowed and complete representative.

Chocano, equally enthusiastic in his admiration for energetic

action, celebrates such achievements of the present age as the Panamá Canal in the poems *En el Canal*, *El Istmo de Panamá*, *La Epopeya del Pacífico*. He admires the material progress of the great Northern Republic and urges Spanish America, if it wishes to retain its independence, to imitate the Anglo-Americans and rival them in economic power: "la América debe, ya que aspira a ser libre, imitarles primero e igualarles después" (*La Epopeya del Pacífico*). In *Ciudad Moderna* he glorifies Buenos Aires as the concrete example of great industrial and artistic achievement; Buenos Aires, "la madre ya en cinta de la Raza Futura." A train, passing over the Andes and invading the lofty domain of the condor, typifies for him resistless human endeavor. Niagara Falls, whose beauty and majesty have inspired many poets, humbly applies its gigantic strength to the turning of the wheels of industry (*Las Cataratas del Niágara*). He urges his fellow Spanish-Americans to recognize the dignity of labor, "que el trabajo no es culpa de un Edén perdido, sino el único medio de llegarlo a gozar" (*La Epopeya del Pacífico*): that work, energy, and idealism are the essential characteristics of the best type of man, the man who has

tres estrellas en el alma:
el trabajo, la energía y el ensueño;
el trabajo que da fuerzas, la energía que da audacias
y el ensueño que da glorias. (*La Elegía del Órgano*)

Whitman found in the surging life of his own time and country abundant material for epic treatment; there was for him neither the need nor the inclination to turn to history or tradition for heroic personages or great achievements to glorify. Through extensive reading he familiarized himself with the past, and it was his belief that the modern democratic individual was indissolubly linked with the whole universe, past and present, was the result of many forces working in coöperation; that the present can be understood only in its relations to the past, "for what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?" (*Passage to India*). In his admiration for strong personalities he was tempted at times to celebrate the strong men of the past, but true to his democratic principles and finding abundant material in the life about him, he gladly returned to the present. His usual attitude is that expressed in such declarations as "Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul," or, "I stand in my place with my own day here." Chocano, growing to manhood in the

prosaic age that followed the ebbing enthusiasm of the mid-century democracies and in a country in which the political life has not been notable for broad statesmanship, has not found in contemporary life sufficient material for epic inspiration. He turned naturally to a more heroic past, and has been more and more reluctant to come back to the present. Thus the heroic figures of the discovery and conquest of the New World are celebrated by him with unsurpassed enthusiasm and vigor; the *conquistadores*, Cortés, Pizarro, Valdivia, Jiménez de Quesada, Alvarado, and many others, mingle with epic splendor in the pages of *Alma América* with the scarcely less heroic representatives of the indigenous races, Caupolicán, Cuauhtemoc, Ollantá, Lautaro, dominant personalities that could find no place in a modern democracy. So greatly does he admire these heroes of the past that again and again he claims identity with them; in himself are epitomized all their heroic qualities. In *Avatar* he arrogantly claims to be the reincarnation of an Inca emperor, a conquistador, a viceroy, and is now, greater than all, the poet with his divine mission. In *Blasón* he makes boast of a pretended dual lineage, Inca and Spanish:

y las dos castas fundo con épico fragor.
La sangre es española e incaica es el latido;
¡y de no ser Poeta, quizás yo hubiese sido
un blanco Adventurero o un indio Emperador!

He is the poet of the indigenous races, "el cantor de América autóctono y salvaje"; he is "el alma primitiva de los Andes y las selvas." He is the poet of the Spanish conquest and colonies:

Los Virreyes, los Incas y los Conquistadores
renuevan los alardes de sus tiempos mejores
al par dentro mis venas y dentro mi canción.

He is the poet of modern democratic America (*Ciudad Moderna*, *Crisol*). He is the poet of America, past and present, animate and inanimate, "cuando le dan las selvas vírgenes sus arpegios" (*Símbolo*).

DEMOCRACY

Chocano's glorification of the heroic figures of the Spanish conquest and colonization is indicative of an essential difference between the two poets, so essential that it deprives the title sometimes given to Chocano, the Walt Whitman of South America, of much of its

significance. The main source of Whitman's inspiration was democracy as he saw it in the process of realization in the United States, and democracy meant for him liberty, fraternity and equality. His passionate belief in all three principles is everywhere apparent in his poetry.

These same democratic principles made a strong appeal to Chocano in his youth. One of the longest and best poems in *Iras Santas*, 1895, insists upon equality as emphatically as the most ardent advocate of mid-century democracy could wish:

¡Oh, la igualdad! Hermanos, ¿no habéis visto
al sol vertiendo rayos sobre todos? . . .
Sin igualdad no hay luz. ¿De qué ha servido
que le hayan dado al pájaro derecho
a construir en cualquier campo un nido,
si el hombre con sus siervos y sus reyes,
no obedece al impulso de su pecho
sino al mandato de infernales leyes?
¡El todo para el todo! El mundo todo
es de la Humanidad; y ella, en conjunto,
sola, a sí misma, gobernarse debe:
que obedezca a un impulso y no a un tormento . . .
¡La hoja que cae y la hoja que se mueve
no obedece a otra hoja, sino al viento!

(*El Sermón de la Montaña*)

Many other poems of the same collection might be cited to show his love of equality and fraternity, his hatred of tyranny; and it is not until we come upon the group of poems entitled *En la Mazmorra* and bearing the date and place of composition, Callao, Aljibes y Casamatas, 1894, that we begin to suspect that it was not wholly fraternal interest in oppressed humanity that aroused his hatred of tyrants, that at least part of his indignation was due to his personal hatred of the military dictator who had imprisoned him because of his political opposition. This suspicion grows to certainty as we follow the career of the poet. As soon as the military dictator gave way to a civilian president, and Chocano, along with other political prisoners, was freed from prison, the words so often repeated in *Iras Santas*, "libertad, igualdad, fraternidad," seemed to lose much of their attraction; democracy of the Whitmanesque variety ceased to be a source of inspiration. Twelve years later he was apparently ashamed of his early socialistic and revolutionary poems. In the volume published in 1906, *Alma América*, appeared the author's

note: "Ténganse por no escritos cuantos libros de poesías aparecieron antes con mi nombre," and two years later, in selecting and revising his early poems for the volume entitled *Fiat Lux!*, he was careful to exclude those most imbued with the ideas of fraternity and equality.

That Chocano should have lost interest in the kind of democracy that was so insistent upon equality is not surprising; it would have been more surprising had he retained it in opposition to the reactionary spirit of his time. The inevitable result of equality as understood by the mid-century idealists was the glorification of the mediocre, a tendency that, if given free play, would make progress in civilization impossible. Even Whitman, the exultantly optimistic advocate of equality in his poetry, expressed in prose the danger to which it led: "Democracy has been so retarded and jeopardized by powerful personalities, that its first instincts are fain to clip, conform, bring in stragglers, and reduce everything to a dead level" (*A Backward Glance*). The two essential principles of democracy today are liberty and fraternity; these two take sufficient care of equality, which has come to mean nothing more than equality of opportunity.

More serious than the neglect of equality in all except his early poems is the lack in Chocano of genuine fraternity. In spite of his early poems celebrating the brotherhood of man, and in spite of his recent activities in Mexico in behalf of the socially and economically oppressed, he does not possess the fraternal spirit; he is naturally aristocratic and naturally claims kinship with the leaders of men in all ages. Like many other social reformers he is deeply interested in the welfare of the masses collectively; with respect to its individual members it would be impossible for him to say as Whitman did in *Song of Myself*:

I am enamour'd of growing out-doors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods.
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes
 and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

Whitman's willingness to identify himself with the "common, average man," his all-embracing fraternalism, finds no parallel in Chocano's writings. In *Alma América* are scores of poems inspired by his admiration for the strong men of past ages, not only the *con-*

quistadores whose heroic deeds might well excuse his admiration, but also the viceroys, the representatives in Perú of the despotic government of Spain. The poet who could find inspiration in the tinsel brilliance of the vice-regal court of Lima and in the amorous adventures of the viceroys could hardly be said to possess the fraternal spirit. In certain moods he yearns for the more heroic ages “cuando florecían tantos despotismos, duros aunque nobles, malos aunque bellos” (*Añoranza*), and would gladly return to them: “¡Quién volviese a esos siglos del valor y el donaire! ¡Quién viviese la vida de ese tiempo que fué!” At times the prosiness of the democratic present arouses his scorn:

En el viejo palacio donde finos Virreyes
dan su brazo a las damas y su pecho al amor,
de improviso se imponen democráticas leyes
como un pie de elefante que aplastara una flor.
(El Palacio de los Virreyes)

This does not indicate his normal attitude toward the present, and is due somewhat to his romantic impulses; but the mere fact that he is capable of expressing himself thus at any time makes it difficult to consider him a poet of democracy.

With regard to liberty, the third element of Whitman's democracy, Chocano has shown himself a more consistent advocate in his poetry as well as in his political and social activities. As a young man he suffered imprisonment in his own country in the cause of liberty; several years later he fought in Mexico under General Villa against the military dictatorship of General Huerta. In eloquent speeches and pamphlets he analyzed the causes of the revolution, prescribed education and economic independence for the regeneration of the masses, and even formulated a system of democratic laws as the basis for a reconstructed government. As a poet, he is drawn irresistibly to the dominant personalities of past ages; as a man living in the democratic world of today, he is in sympathy with democratic government.

Chocano, although often discontented with the present, is optimistic as regards the future of democracy. His optimism is less exultant than that of Whitman, the poet of democracy in its period of most vigorous growth, the poet who never wearied of singing of the glories of “These States” for which he announced “splendors and majesties to make all the previous politics of the earth insignifi-

cant." Though less given to the definite expression of his optimism, Chocano shows no less faith in the great destiny of his race in its New World environment. Looking far into the future (*Canto del Porvenir*), he sees a new world that will combine the virility of the Adam of the North and the culture of the Eve of the South, whose watchword will be Liberty and whose center will be the Amazon valley :

joven, libre y fecundo
el País de Amazonas será el Centro del Mundo.

LOCAL COLOR

With regard to their treatment of nature there is a notable difference in the methods of the two poets. Both give evident proof of deep interest in the external world, with its physical features, its fauna and flora, but with Whitman everything is so subordinated to his passionate interest in humanity, that external nature is seldom permitted to occupy the foreground. He makes frequent mention of the fauna and flora, the physical features and geographical names of North America, but he does not attempt to present them in definite pictures; they are introduced merely in their relations to himself and humanity. The abundant local color in his poetry is gained, not through elaborate description, but through the power of suggestion; even the mere names of things and places are so charged with the poet's emotions that they produce the effect of local color without the accompaniment of description. In some of his poems Chocano uses this method of suggestion, but in general his treatment of nature is very different. There is nothing in Whitman to correspond to the nature poems of Chocano, sonnets for the most part, in each of which he puts before us, with clearness of vision and imaginative power, a carefully elaborated and complete picture of some object in external nature or some aspect of it. A list of the titles of such poems would resemble the table of contents of a book treating of the natural history and geography of South America: *Los Andes*, *Las selvas*, *La caoba*, *Las orquídeas*, *El sinsonte*, *La magnolia*, *La píña*, *El sueño del boa*, *La visión del cóndor*, to mention only a few of them. The pictures he gives us are not those of the photographer or scientist merely; they are the pictures of the inspired painter of nature, in whom the imagination reinforces the eyes. Human qualities are often attributed to the various objects

of external nature, but not, it should be noted, in the manner of the Romantic poets. In Chocano's nature poems the external world is given an existence independent of humanity, is presented in a scientific, objective way; it is vivified by the frequent use of poetic imagery drawn from human experience. In his pictures of South American flora, fauna, and physical features, we see nature through the eyes of the scientist and through the vivifying imagination of the poet.

EPIC LYRICISM

Because of the continual mingling in both poets of subjective and objective qualities, we find applied to them statements equally paradoxical. *Leaves of Grass*, it has been said, is the "epic of personality," by which is meant that Whitman is subjective, lyrical, in that his own personality is the chief source of his inspiration; he is objective, epic, in that he is merely the typical man, the "divine average" of democratic America. Similarly, Chocano, in the greater part of his poetry, has the objectivity of the epic poet, but so infused with feeling is the matter and so insistent is the ego, that it is difficult to say whether the lyric or epic element predominates.

This identity of each poet with his race, based upon the serene conviction that he epitomizes his race and that to him has been given the divine mission of expressing in poetry its ideals and aspirations, explains their continual self-laudation. When, for example, Whitman says "I am the acme of things accomplished, and the encloser of things to be" (*Song of Myself*), he is thinking of himself as the representative man in a democratic state. Similarly, when Chocano speaks of himself as "un personaje de Homero" or as "el poeta mismo de los Andes," or tells us that he is the incarnation of all the virtues of his race (*En el Museo del Prado, El Arco de Ulises, Blasón, Símbolo*, etc.), he is glorifying the Spanish race in America. Had either poet possessed the sense of humor, he would have avoided these and similar exaggerations; on the other hand, they would not have written the bardic strophes that make them what they are, the exultant, exuberant poets of the New World.

LITERARY INDEPENDENCE

On the purely formal side we find another characteristic of Americanism, the avowed determination of both poets to break away from literary tradition. In theory they are both revolutionary in

their declaration of independence of all the established rules of art; in practice, Whitman alone is wholly consistent and radical. Near the end of his life he said that the purpose of all his writings was "to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic personality" (*A Backward Glance*). This literary independence resulted in a complete break with all accepted theories of poetic art and gained for him the indifference of those for whom he primarily wrote, the masses that composed his ideal democracy. His poetry is essentially prose, heightened and intensified by poetic imagery and deep feeling; it is not poetry in the ordinary acceptation of the word, and scarcely anything could be said regarding his purely literary qualities that would not lend itself to controversy. In Chocano's poetry there is no such break with tradition, in spite of his many declarations of independence. In the sonnet *Troquel* he declares his unwillingness to drink from the Castalian fountain, wander through the groves of Parnassus, or do homage to the nine Muses; he will boldly follow his independent course. Continuing he says:

Mi culto no es el culto de la pasada gente,
ni me es bastante el vuelo solemne del Pegaso:
los trópicos avivan la flama en que me abraso;
y en mis oídos suena la voz de un continente.

Seeking a new source of inspiration, like a new Columbus he will boldly cross uncharted seas in his caravel of poesy and discover a new world of literature, indigenous Americanism. He declares that old literary theories are inadequate to meet the needs of American literature:

que es el arte de América al de Europa
lo que una cumbre al cuerpo de una estatua,
lo que un abismo al hueco de una copa.

(*Arte Sincero*)

He refuses to ally himself with any school of poets; he is a free lance with the device on his shield, "En el arte caben todas las escuelas como en un rayo de sol todos los colores."

In theory, then, Chocano is unwilling to submit to any restrictions; in practice, he seems satisfied with the metrical freedom gained by the *Modernistas* and offers in his poetry examples of all kinds of versification made popular by them. In spite of some irregularities, due apparently to negligence rather than design, and in spite of an

attempt now and then at free verse (*Fragmento Líminar de una epopeya cíclica*, 1918), formal excellence of the traditional kind is characteristic of his best work. It is in the content of his poetry that we find the Americanism of Chocano.

If the essential qualities of the two poets have been correctly presented in the foregoing comparison, the evident conclusion is that the title sometimes given to Chocano, "the Walt Whitman of South America," can be accepted only with certain reservations. If it is taken to mean that Chocano is an essentially democratic poet, it conveys a wrong impression of one whose natural tendencies are aristocratic. If it is taken to mean that Chocano is the poet of strenuous endeavor and achievement, it has a basis of truth in a considerable part of his poetry. If it is taken to mean that Chocano is a literary anarchist, it misrepresents a poet whose formal excellence is noteworthy. If it is taken to mean that Chocano is the chief exponent of Americanism in the contemporary poetry of Spanish America, it will be acceptable to the many admirers of the Peruvian poet.

A more significant title, one sufficiently broad to give free play to his complex character and versatile inspiration and one that indicates the nature of his aspirations and achievements, is "El Poeta de América," the Poet of Spanish America. "Es *whitmaniano* este aliento inmenso, este deseo de cantar cuanto nace a la vida en la América libre" (V. García Calderón, *La Literatura peruana*, Revue Hispanique, Vol. 31). His inspiration is more than Whitmanesque in its range. Whereas Whitman's purpose was to put all the democratic, contemporary life of the United States into his poetry, Chocano has attempted to interpret poetically Spanish-American life in all its phases, past and present, its history and traditions, Spanish and indigenous, as well as its *milieu*, the physical features, the fauna and flora of that large part of the New World that received its civilization from Spain. This he has aspired to do; and until another poet has produced a volume of poetry surpassing *Alma América* in poetic qualities and in Americanism, Chocano will continue to be known as "El Poeta de América."

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